

Book Reviews

William V. Spanos. *Exiles in the City: Hannah Arendt and Edward W. Said in Counterpoint*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. Pp. xii + 266. US\$62.95.

In *Exiles in the City* William V. Spanos intensifies an attack he has launched in several books by summoning Heidegger's critique of modernity in order to condemn American policies, which claim to promote democratic freedom but impose an aggressive "planetary imperial hegemony" (129). Indeed "condemn" is too weak a word for Spanos's anger at the harm caused by "depthless" modern thinking: "a massified abstract, quantitative, calculative, and instrumentalist—utterly thoughtless—sociopolitical agent of brutal violence, torture, mutilation, dispossession" (8). His audacious aim is to "rethink thinking itself" (41) through a contrapuntal reading of two courageous thinkers, Hannah Arendt and Edward Said, who advocate a secular humanism morally and intellectually attuned to the paradoxes of contemporary humanity. To this end he composes a three-part drama: a history of metaphysical misjudgements about human existence (*Dasein*) that have contaminated western, and now global culture; an exilic consciousness evoked by post-structuralism and exemplified by Arendt and Said, which exposes the brutality of current politics and especially of American exceptionalism; and the utopian promise of "a playful polyphonic *polis*" (101), which would redeem our self-destructive mess. In an irony of which Spanos is surely aware, this triumphant sequence recalls the hopes of American Puritans whose missionary zeal is a prime source of their nation's sins. In view of his distaste for theology, it would be unkind to call his argument a crusade, but his swelling prose sometimes recalls their jeremiads:

The Greco-Roman (Onto-logical), Judeo-Christian (Theo-logical), and Humanist Enlightenment (Anthropo-logical) vocation alienates human beings from the transient or finite time—the time of the now (*ho nyn kairos*), of being *inter esse* (in the midst of the inter-esting, of the occasion)—coercively turns their mind's eye away from *this* (*unheimliche*) world to one (*heimliche*) beyond, to a future *Telos*. (89)

This style has splendid "philological momentum" (117), but is unlikely to attract converts.

This is an ambitious book, a virtuoso performance admirable for its wide reading, verbal dexterity, moral indignation, and its romantic delight in intellectual daring. Its five chapters are devoted to exposing the corruption of

political language; tracing the emergence of exilic consciousness as it resists “the polyvalent dehumanizing reductions of the imperial nation-state” (56); reclaiming secular humanism and post-structuralism from anti-humanists, who have mistaken the generosity of the former and the worldliness of the latter; demystifying the belligerent ideologies of Zionism and American exceptionalism; and orchestrating a final, deft counterpoint of Arendt and Said.

Weaving together these threads is a scholarly argument at once supple and vehement. Spanos is a true academic in the sense that he diagnoses our malaise as caused by thought but curable by astute rethinking. We have been sickened but can be healed by philosophy. Such a view is inevitably reductive, even as it disparages reductiveness and praises plurality. Even as it insists on the urgency of “worldliness,” of confronting political violence as it actually occurs, it attributes both our propensity for violence and the imperialist ideology that justifies it to paradigmatic thinking—to “Western thought” propelled for centuries by Plato’s baleful metaphysical legacy. Metaphysical thought is transcendental, essentialist, hegemonic, identitarian, hierarchical, and so on. It continues to infect the “natural supernaturalism” (M.H. Abrams’s romantic term) of the Enlightenment and the modern nation-state, but can be corrected by a differential, profane, deconstructive mode of thought, which “openly and radically breaks with the transcendent in the finally unnamable name of finitude or imminence—an ek-istent in-sistent, ontic-ontological, out-side in-side, being-in-the-world of human being” (83).

I confess that I am divided in my admiration for such passages, which parade their own sophistication. In the same vein, I wonder if Spanos expects too much from Arendt and Said, whose “polyvalent insider-outsider” status (145) arising from their marginality makes them brilliant “conscious pariahs” (Arendt’s term of approval). Here is another kind of exceptionalism, whose advantage wanes as their views cease to be eccentric, since everyone cannot be marginal. More specifically, they are insider-outsiders to America—Spanos’s true mistress—as if their encounter with America inspired what was most daring in their thinking. Thus Said’s analysis of Zionist ideology is best understood in relation to Puritan theology. Arendt’s revelation of the “banality of evil” at the Eichmann trial is best appreciated for its “ominously striking resemblance” (14) to the bland hypocrisy of American foreign policy.

The affiliation between these two intellectual heroes is indeed “tantalizing” (142) and original, although the underlying argument about how they illuminate our “post-imperial global occasion” (143) is not. Spanos’s painstaking search for links between a German-American, secular Jew writing in the shadow of the Holocaust, and a Palestinian-American, secular Christian (this last affiliation not addressed) writing in the shadow of the “Nakba” or

disaster, produces notable insights, but also some lopsided judgments. The “transformation of Judaism into Jewishness” (154), of religion into culture, is not matched by a comparable account of Palestinian or Islamic identities, which are seldom secular. The damning critique of Zionism is not matched by analysis of the intricacies of Palestinian nationalism. Spanos warns that as “triumphant Zionism” inflicts ever greater injustice, it ironically makes “its people”—I presume he means Israelis rather than Jews, who rarely agree on anything, especially Israel—“inexorably destined, in the process of fulfilling the imperatives of their vocation ... to inflict the horrors the Jews suffered ... upon their own Arab others” (179). But the inexorable “destiny” invoked here, whose logic seems to push toward extermination, reflects the pressure of Spanos’s own commanding argument, not of historical circumstances (“worldliness”), since the conditions of Nazi Germany and the Middle East are so different.

When Spanos envisions what might lie ahead, his language grows hopeful but diffuse, as he celebrates a human community “transformed into *agonic play* in the *time of the now*, by which I mean the finite or transient time of the human occasion” (59). In this brave new world of “*non-belonging belonging*” (191), stripped of religion, national animosity, self-deluding rhetoric and the will-to-power, antagonists will be reconciled by “dissonantly polyphonic” (58) respect. Adapting T.S. Eliot’s choreography but stripping it of religious conviction, Spanos foresees “the complete consort dancing together’ contrapuntally” (193), though not, if I follow the metaphor correctly, obliged to dance to the same tune. What kind of “radically new human polity” (58) will then flourish in Palestine, Israel and America remains unclear, but it is a pious hope.

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